

VZCZCXRO7990
RR RUEHDBU RUEHPW
DE RUEHBUL #1278/01 1391303
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 191303Z MAY 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8988
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001278

DEPARTMENT FOR SRAP, SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM
STATE PASS TO AID FOR ASIA/SCAA
USFOR-A FOR POLAD

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [MARR](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: Balkh Province - Security Setbacks, Corruption, Uneven
Development Hinder Progress

11. (U) Summary: Strong provincial leadership by Governor Atta makes the Balkh government work, but a worsening security picture in districts west of the provincial capital Mazar-e-Sharif and widespread corruption within his administration threaten to undermine people's confidence in government. Balkh Governor Atta continues to blame the international community for not allocating the same development assistance to the north as it does to the south and east of the country.

Security

12. (U) Despite having one of the most permissive security environments in the country, Balkh province still faces serious security challenges. One of them is stabilizing the Pashtun-majority districts of Chemtal, Charbolak, and Balkh, which flank the ring road. Attacks by anti-government elements (AGE) on GIROA authorities and ISAF forces are on the rise in those districts, and the largely unmentored and undermanned ranks of the Afghan National Police (ANP) are incapable of neutralizing the insurgent threat. Governor Atta exerts tremendous influence over the ANSF in his province, but the ANSF do not enjoy the trust of Pashtun villagers in the three above-mentioned districts.

13. (U) This is not a new phenomenon; those communities have ties to Hezb-I Islami Gulbuddin elements and allege discrimination by government security forces, whom they accuse of having Jamiat Party connections. Former HiG members in Balkh - led by Atta's nemesis, Paktia Governor Juma Khan Hamdard - hold Atta responsible for last year's murders of 14 former HiG elders, but the truth may never be known. Atta has denied the charges and no investigations into the killings have been ordered.

14. (SBU) Provincial Council chairman Azimi privately acknowledges that Governor Atta has been too preoccupied in recent weeks with his party's election-related activities to deal with the unrest in those districts. Azimi cited the examples of how the government has dealt with similar problems in the districts of Sholgara and Dowlatabad, where insurgents had previously been active. There, the governor used his influence and cash to encourage residents of non-Pashtun villages encircling Pashtun villages to stay vigilant and report suspicious activities to the governor's office. That approach yielded actionable intelligence that resulted in some arrests and killings of insurgents - not by the district police, but by a better-equipped unit under the direct control of the Provincial Chief of Police. The PC chairman said neither he nor the governor has confidence in the regular ANP units in those districts. The PRT has voiced its concerns to the governor about the police chief in Chemtal, who is believed to have ties to insurgents. Governor Atta agrees that the police chief there must go and is reportedly looking for a way to make that happen.

15. (U) The onset of spring has seen an uptick in threats and incidents even in the provincial capital city, Mazar-e-Sharif. Two separate car bomb attacks - one claiming the life of a Norwegian

ISAF soldier - occurred there within a one-week period in April 2009
- the first such attacks in two years.

¶6. (SBU) ISAF has made Balkh the focus of efforts to affect the transfer of lead security responsibility (TLSR) into Afghan hands, which would make it the second province after Kabul to achieve this status. To this end, Germany has launched Focused District Development (FDD) training of the ANP in Dehdadi district and together with the U.S., has pledged to continue with FDD training of district police throughout the province. Germany envisions that Balkh will formally be classified as TLSR-ready when certain governance indicators are met and after all police in the province have been trained through FDD - a process expected to take another three-to-five years. In practice, TLSR has essentially happened in Balkh, with ISAF playing a supporting role even now by responding to ANSF requests for assistance. Sweden and Finland have already started discussions about shifting their security assistance efforts to the other three provinces (Jowzjan, Sar-e-pul, and Samangan) of the PRT's area of responsibility once Balkh achieves formal TLSR status.

¶7. (U) Balkh ANSF maintained excellent security with little ISAF assistance during the high-profile Persian New Year's festival in Mazar-e-Sharif in March. Yet stove-piping of information and lack of coordination by the Afghan army, police and intelligence service remain impediments to effective command and control in Balkh. District police chiefs do not communicate laterally with their peers in other districts; information flows up to headquarters and back down, but rarely between districts. Cross-provincial border information sharing is even poorer between the ANSF in districts like Charbolak and Chemtal and their counterparts in adjacent districts that belong to Jowzjan and Sar-e-pul provinces.

KABUL 00001278 002 OF 003

¶8. (U) The transition from the ANP-led Joint Regional Command Center (JRCC) to the ANA-led northern regional Operations Coordination Center (OCCR) is incomplete. The OCCR is meant to coordinate the collective efforts of ANSF in Regional Command North, and is supposed to be manned by deputy commanders from the ANA, ANP, and NDS. But at present, it is manned only by ANP duty personnel and a couple of liaison officers from the ANA and NDS who attend the morning briefings. The OCCR functions as a place to share information and not as the coordination center it is intended to be.

The Finnish military contingent at the PRT has agreed to provide personnel to mentor the ANA staff who man the 24/7 operation, but those mentors have not yet arrived. ISAF has shown a greater willingness to incorporate the concept of jointness with the Afghan police and Afghan army in its patrols and operations, but the low numbers of available ANSF units limit this in practice.

¶9. (U) Governor Atta wants Balkh province to become a hub for Afghan military operations, given its strategic central location in the north. American military personnel who train Afghan commando units in Balkh give them high marks and would like to see them supported with rotary assets to take on the insurgent threat in Ghormach district of Faryab. The governor has also pushed for the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) process to begin in six districts of Balkh simultaneously - a first for DIAG. While Atta covets this distinction, it is clear that the DIAG process in and of itself will not make a huge dent in reducing the numbers of weapons believed to be buried in caches throughout the province.

Governance

¶10. (SBU) A former mujahideen commander turned politician and businessman, Governor Atta enjoys unrivalled influence in the northern region. His government is largely a one-man show. Five years into his term, Atta remains the longest serving governor to serve in a single province, and he has commented that he would like to remain Balkh governor for another five-to-ten years. Atta has shown himself to be a very powerful and effective administrator, but he continues to turn a blind eye to conflicts of interest, thus blurring the line between personal and official business. Atta took the initiative of establishing Balkh's own anti-corruption commission and has vowed to bring to justice anyone found guilty of

corruption. Transparency into the work of the commission is lacking and hopes are not high that the commission will curb the rampant corruption within provincial and municipal departments. The civil service reform commission in Balkh has seen its work of identifying candidates for government jobs based on merit undermined by influential people trying to install their associates in key revenue-generating departments, such as in the customs department at the Heyratan border with Uzbekistan. Atta is known to mistrust the justice system and has made it no secret that he believes the chief judge in Balkh is corrupt.

¶11. (SBU) The Balkh provincial council is weak and its politically ambitious, well educated chairman is generally regarded by the public as a mouthpiece for the governor. PC chairman Azimi concedes privately that even as an elected official, he is politically subservient to Governor Atta. Azimi, who has decided not to run again in the August 2009 provincial council elections, is awaiting Atta's blessing on his plans to run for Parliament in 2010. Other provincial council members have privately complained that the chairman utters public statements on behalf of the council without prior consultation with them.

Development

¶12. (U) Atta believes the north has not yielded its due peace dividend in the form of development dollars despite having much greater levels of security than the Taliban-infested south and east. He does not accept that a dangerous province like Helmand should receive hundreds of millions of dollars in development money while a relatively safe province like Balkh gets only a tiny fraction. This frustration has led him to step up criticism of the Swedish-led PRT and the international community for not doing enough reconstruction in his province. Atta even wrote a letter to UNAMA last year asking for a new lead nation to replace Sweden as head of the PRT for that reason. Sweden, working through SIDA, its development arm, channels the lion's share of its development assistance directly through the central government in Kabul - thus largely removing the PRT from the development picture, unlike the close relationship between USAID and the U.S. military in U.S.-led PRTs. The Swedes have, however, imposed a "soft earmark" on their contributions to Kabul, requesting that 25 percent of their funds be expended in the four provinces covered by its PRT.

¶13. (U) Atta is not content with "soft" capacity building projects,

KABUL 00001278 003 OF 003

such as support for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission or training of journalists, that Swedish development money typically funds. Atta wants roads and infrastructure projects, and he is getting that to a limited extent through other means: Germany has embarked on efforts to build a world class airport terminal in Mazar-e-Sharif and a runway that can handle jumbo jet traffic. Germany is considering paving a road directly linking Mazar and Kunduz, which would benefit commerce by greatly reducing travel times (Kunduz has a border crossing to Tajikistan). Atta would like to see extension of the rail line that would connect Mazar-e-Sharif with Uzbekistan and the whole of Europe - a development that could make Balkh province one of the most important trade hubs in the country and attract more investment to the north.

¶14. (U) Atta is proud that his province was the first to be declared poppy free but is angry that, in spite of this achievement, Balkh's farmers have not received alternative livelihood projects that he claims were promised by the central government. He feels that he put his reputation on the line when he encouraged farmers to eradicate first their poppy and later cannabis crops and has little to offer them in the way of rewards. This overlooks the fact that Balkh has received \$2.5 million in Good Performers Initiative monies for maintaining poppy-free status since 2007. Balkh recently received another \$1 million in GPI money for the 2008 cultivation results. It has spent these funds on tractors, health clinics and potable water projects. Still, Atta feels those amounts are insufficient when he compares Balkh's slice of the pie with that of poppy-growing provinces like Helmand and Kandahar.

¶15. (U) Atta takes a hands-on approach to development and even paid

a contractor from his own pocket to develop and refine Balkh's provincial development plan. But he harbors disillusionment with donors who either do not want to fund or are unable to fund his top priority projects across the plan's eight sectors. USAID remains the single biggest donor in Balkh, and Atta appreciates its reconstruction efforts. Despite a rocky start with USAID's \$40 million Mazar Foods Initiative (MFI) - envisioned as the showcase agricultural project in the northern region - Atta is on board with the project's new focus. However, any reduction in funding for MFI or other USAID projects in Balkh or redirecting of USAID funds to other areas of the country may find the U.S. Government on the receiving end of Atta's criticism.

EIKENBERRY